
The Dynamic of Secession

Viva Ona Bartkus



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1 Introduction

This book investigates secession. It seeks to answer a single question: why do groups decide to secede? Since secession is frequently a contested subject, it may be helpful at the outset to clarify both its meaning and my approach. Secession is the formal withdrawal from an established, internationally recognized state by a constituent unit to create a new sovereign state. The decision to secede represents an instance of political disintegration, when the citizens of a sub-system withdraw their political activities from the central government to focus them on a centre of their own. When the leaders of both a seceding community and the state express their positions in stark, absolute terms, the avenue of compromise is often precluded, thereby causing secessionist conflicts to be among the most bitter of struggles. To the observer, secession often appears irrational as it entails the ostensible sacrifice of economic opportunities and the endurance of social upheaval. Because of the coercive powers which the state can employ in these disputes, secessionist struggles frequently become violent and protracted, as both the seceding community and the state lose the willingness to accommodate each other's needs. Thus, secession is disintegrative in the most fundamental sense: it involves not the overthrow of existing government institutions, but rather the territorial dismemberment of a state. In this book, I refer to the groups attempting secession as "distinct communities."

The fact that secession seems to plague all types of societies – liberal democratic, former communist, and developing – implies the possible existence of many different routes to secession. The structured comparative study of numerous examples of secession and separatist agitation provides a broad perspective and enables the reformulation of the idiosyncratic motivations of each case into more general

variables. I propose that the timing of the decision to secede can be understood within a framework structured around four primary variables: (1) the benefits of continued membership in the larger existing political entity;¹ (2) the costs of such membership; (3) the costs of secession; and (4) the benefits of secession. Some costs and benefits are clearly qualitative; others are extremely difficult or even impossible to quantify. To have impact, though, all must be perceived by the distinct community. A fluctuating phenomenon such as secession, however, cannot be explained by a constant, such as the four costs and benefits taken as static conditions. Secessions arise only when the distinct community determines that there has been a shift in the balance of these four variables. The types of changes the distinct community so identifies occur at both the level of the state and the international system. These changes include both rapidly moving events, such as a sequence of political or economic initiatives, and gradual transformations of attitudes, such as mounting discrimination or growing tolerance of diversity.

Secession, by its very nature, raises the basic question of justification. The perceived justice of the secessionist cause colors the opinions and potential support of members of the distinct community itself, the central government, foreign governments, and the broader international community. After a good deal of consideration, it seems to me that a community embarking upon secession has already assumed a moral right to secede. Therefore, since the book investigates secession crises, it will not delve deeply into the arguments regarding when secession would be morally justifiable or even desirable.² Rather, the book builds on the foundation of an existing body of arguments specifying and circumscribing the conditions under which there may be a "right" of secession in order to focus on exploring and explaining the timing of the secession decision. What is most important for the study of the dynamic of secession is not a resolution to this

¹ For the sake of brevity, the book will use "the benefits of membership" for those benefits associated with the distinct community's continued membership within the larger state. The same description applies to the "costs of membership."

² For a detailed discussion of the moral justifications for secession, see John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works* vol. XIX (London, 1963), p. 549; Harry Beran, "A Liberal Theory of Secession," *Political Studies* (1984), Vol. XXXII, pp. 21–31; Allen Buchanan, *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce From Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991); Lee Buchheit, *Secession: The Legitimacy of Self-Determination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Michael Walzer, "The Reform of the International System" in Oyvind Osterud (ed.), *Studies of War and Peace* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), p. 238.

ethical debate, but rather an understanding that the debate exists and will persist with each new secession crisis.

The book's focus is deliberately limited to the origins of secession, to explain why discontent leads to secession at certain times and to political demands short of separation under other circumstances. In other words, it focuses on a single "snapshot" in a set of rapidly changing events. Critical to understanding the snapshot, however, is an observation of the entire moving picture. The investigation of case studies spanning the period from the first stirrings of discontent to the outcomes of confrontation is crucial in order to place the moment of decision to secede in its proper context. Furthermore, in seeking to isolate the various constraints on the crucial decision, the book consistently comments on numerous intrinsic aspects of the state. The many differentiated routes to secession, to a certain extent, reflect changing conceptions of sovereignty and the state itself.

The argument rests on inferring the causes of secession decisions. A brief note on causality is necessary: discriminating analysis of historical documents such as the memoranda of secessionist organizations and autobiographies of their leaders paints only an incomplete picture of the dynamic of secession. Leaders cannot instigate a crisis without mass support. Due to the often diffuse nature of disaffection with the ruling regime among members of the community, their motivations for protest and even for secession cannot easily be determined. The argument is based upon the study of each case of secession within its own circumstances. The approach is to ascribe perceptions and apprehensions to the community through a process of scrutinizing and ultimately understanding the significant issues of the time. The approach does presuppose both the existence of basic human elements of motivation for such inspired acts as secession and the possibility that these common human elements of motivation can be discerned through comparative study.

The argument itself is organized into three main sections. Part I establishes the conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis of secession. Potential territorial rearrangement and the creation of new states have not always been a possible outlet for discontent. Several elements are necessary for a secession crisis: an identifiable unit of people or "distinct community," territory, leaders, and discontent. The four chapters of Part II describe in detail the cost/benefit framework, its four variables, and the economic, political, and cultural factors which constitute each. Focusing on the dynamic of secession, Part III

addresses directly the question of why groups decide to secede. Its four chapters explore the way in which changes in the balance among the four primary variables precipitate secession attempts.

Expressions of surprise have greeted the recent eruption of secessionary activity in Europe. None the less, a broader perspective of European history easily demonstrates that secession is not a novel phenomenon. As James Crawford notes, "... until this century, secession was certainly the most conspicuous, as well as probably the most usual method of the creation of new states".³ Crawford lists numerous examples of secession between 1776 and 1900; if he had extended this time period to include the immediate post-World War I era, his list would have been substantially enlarged.⁴

Given the rising incidence of secessionist activity in developing countries, in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, and in Western liberal democracies, this study of secession is a timely addition to this less-well-developed area of social science and international relations research. Potential extrapolations of such a study would involve reflections on sovereignty, since sovereign status is the key attribute of the state to which secessionists aspire. Moreover, the numerous case studies may reveal the extent to which a state's treatment of its distinct communities contributes to the decision to secede. A fuller explanation of the connection between changes in the four primary variables and the decision to secede would reveal the conditions under which states can influence such decisions. It would indicate the policies useful in the pursuit of particular outcomes in the secession dynamic and the limits of their effectiveness. Thus, from a better understanding of the "snapshot," we may be able to sketch in the rest of the moving picture. From a clearer understanding of the timing of the decision to secede, we may be able to draw conclusions on some of the means, which are theoretically possible, for the prevention and resolution of secession crises.

My intention is to gain a better understanding of the decision to secede; it is neither to condone nor to condemn specific secession attempts. The strength of the proposed framework lies in its cross-cultural applicability to secession and in its ability to help discern and organize the numerous causal patterns of secession. The book seeks to

³ James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 247.

⁴ Finland, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were but a few of the states created through the process of secession directly after World War I.

demonstrate that a comprehensive perspective on secession can provide a more useful approach than the currently prominent, segmented theories which concentrate on certain regional factors to explain secessionist difficulties. If it generates discussion and debate, I will consider it a success.